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# Spruance Hall dedication Address

Thomas B. Buell

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Address delivered by  
 Commander Thomas B. Buell, U.S. Navy  
 at the occasion of the dedication of  
 Spruance Hall  
 Naval War College  
 7 December 1972

Samuel Eliot Morison wrote the words that best describe Raymond Spruance: "Power of decision and coolness in action were perhaps Spruance's leading characteristics. He envied no one, regarded no one as rival, won the respect of everyone with whom he came in contact, and went ahead in his quiet way, winning victories for his country." Victories that were won by American forces commanded by Spruance were—

The Battle of Midway

The Gilbert Islands: Tarawa and Makin

The Marshall Islands: Kwajalein, Roi-Namur, and Eniwetok

The Marianas: Saipan, Tinian, Guam, and the Battle of the Philippine Sea

Iwo Jima

Okinawa

Before the war Spruance seemed an unlikely candidate for a future fleet commander. As a teenager he wrote and published poetry that displayed his sensitivity and imagination, such as his description of an approaching summer thunderstorm.

A fringe of black comes o'er the  
 northern sky;

It grows and deepens till at last  
 the sun

Grows dim and disappears. The  
 frightened cry

Of birds is heard, that would the  
 tempest shun

The gloomy vault above grows  
 blacker yet,  
 And all except the faintly rustling  
 trees  
 Is quiet now. The dark clouds'  
 fiery pet  
 The lightning silent plays about  
 their knees.

But hark! The storm approaches  
 and the rain

In the far distance may be seen.

A sound  
 Of rushing wind, a thunderclap  
 contain

A warning to be off the tempest's  
 ground.

He was reared by women—at times by a domineering mother and at times by three young and adoring maiden aunts. His father was a recluse whom he hardly knew. Spruance attended the Naval Academy because his family could not afford a university education, and there he was unhappy because of the military regimen, hazing, and stagnant curriculum. Yet he was an excellent student but so inconspicuous that few of his classmates knew him well. He was described in his yearbook as a shy young thing, open and innocent, who would hurt nothing or no one except in the line of duty.

Spruance supported not only his family but his mother and aunts as well.

Following World War I he became discouraged with his low pay, very nearly resigned his commission, but remained in the service because his father-in-law told him he was too honest to be a successful businessman.

His view of a naval career was that the advantages outweighed the disadvantages, and he would do his best in any assignment he was given, whether he liked it or not. Spruance believed that the only meaningful duty for promotion was at sea, and there he remained as long as he could—even though he often became seasick in rough weather. Shore duty was for relaxation, and when he came ashore he sought comfortable quarters and pleasant surroundings. He neither worked overtime nor brought work home because he loved his family and wanted to be with them as much as possible. He sought neither favors nor friends in high places nor duty in Washington to advance his career as did some officers ambitious for flag rank. His integrity and moral courage were uncompromising, and he was frank and honest with his superiors, regardless of the consequences of disagreeing with them or telling them truths they did not want to hear. His professional performance and fitness reports were uniformly outstanding, yet he seemed fatalistic and unconcerned about his chances of promotion to admiral.

What, then, was Spruance seeking in his naval career? One evening in the years just before World War II, he and Bill Halsey and their wives were dining in a San Francisco restaurant. Both were very senior officers and close personal friends. In a reminiscent mood, Halsey asked, "Spruance, if you had your life to live over again, what would you want to be?"

Spruance replied, "A good naval officer."

"So would I," said Halsey.

Spruance's greatness as a World War II naval leader derived from his wisdom, self-discipline, and courage.

Consider first his wisdom. Spruance was an intellectual in a world that does not identify intellectualism with the military profession. Rather, intellectuals are commonly associated with liberal arts and the physical sciences, advanced academic degrees, and learned writing and speaking. Using these standards alone, Spruance would not be regarded as an intellectual. He was a professional naval officer, not a philosopher or a scientist. He held no advanced academic degrees. He disliked writing, and what little he wrote was not for publication. He also disliked public speaking, and what few speeches he did make were soon forgotten.

Nevertheless, he was an intellectual in the purest sense of the word because he possessed superior mental power and relied solely upon his intellect—and never his emotions—when he fought the Japanese. Most Americans hated the Japanese in World War II, yet hatred is an emotion which distorts judgment and reasoning. Therefore Spruance did not hate the Japanese; rather he respected them as an able, hard-fighting enemy.

Spruance was more than a clear-thinking planner and strategist—he also was an able leader of men in combat. He was a perceptive judge of men and their capabilities and expected no more of them than the fulfillment of their potential to perform. Furthermore, Spruance and the other great naval leaders of World War II shared a common belief about command: tell your subordinates what you want done, give them the necessary resources, and then leave them alone so they can accomplish their mission. Spruance's final operation orders were so thorough and clearly written that his subordinates knew *what* they were expected to do, but they were allowed initiative and freedom of action to determine *how* they would accomplish the mission that Spruance had assigned.

When Spruance's forces went to sea to make war, Spruance never interfered

in the business of his subordinate commanders. He felt that the commander at the scene of action had the best understanding of what needed to be done, and Spruance would neither interfere nor offer advice. He would make major decisions or issue general directives when necessary, but the tactical details of an operation were left entirely to his commanders at the scene. Thus he never inhibited his commanders from doing whatever they felt was necessary to carry out their mission.

Spruance often regarded war as an intellectual exercise that posed a complex yet interesting series of problems that challenged and stimulated his mind. Those problems had to be solved using logic that was unaffected by the violent passions of war: pain, suffering, cruelty, brutality, and death. Spruance did seem to be a man without emotion. He displayed neither anger nor anxiety, fear nor fatigue, uncertainty nor indecision. He became regarded as an austere, remote, almost mysterious figure who made war with a cold, calculating, even ruthless mind.

Violent emotions nevertheless remain very much a part of war, therefore, to be an intellectual in war is difficult. This was particularly true for Spruance because he was a man with deep feelings and strong emotions. He felt joy and sadness, he was easily angered, he was impatient, he was sensitive, he was loving and affectionate, he had a sense of humor; in other words, he was entirely human. It was only by virtue of his supreme self-discipline that he was able to control his emotions when confronted by the tragedies of war. This self-discipline was the second factor vital to his success.

It is not certain why Spruance suppressed his emotions, but it is certain that he started early. Although an agnostic as an adult, as a child he was reared in the Methodist faith whose doctrine demanded self-denial and discouraged gaiety or spontaneity or self-

indulgence. His parents' home was very likely without much love or warmth. Perhaps any display of affection was discouraged or ridiculed. He loved his maiden aunts and was happy with them, but by his midteens he began to assert his masculinity and independence. At 16 he would plunge into bitter winter weather without warm clothing, and to his grandmother's worried scoldings he would respond, "I won't be molly coddled!" Throughout his life he continued to take on cold winds and cold waters and took pride in forcing his body to endure hardship and physical discomfort.

Spruance very likely believed it was unworthy of a man to display an emotion that would suggest softness or weakness. He became ashamed of his poems and wanted them destroyed. He was also shy, and he disguised his shyness with a quiet aloofness among strangers.

Spruance knew that his mind was his greatest asset in war, and his way of living assured it would always function efficiently. He did not fatigue it with long hours or with details and minor problems that could be handled by others. Rather he focused his attention on the larger problems and decisions that were the proper concern of the high commander. Spruance kept regular hours and got a good night's sleep, especially before a big operation, thereby zealously conserving his physical and mental resources, using them only when absolutely necessary. His staff never wakened the admiral from his sleep or brought him problems after working hours—unless they were so important that they could not wait until morning.

His legendary walking was as vital to him as eating, sleeping, and breathing. His body was lean and hard; he did not abuse it with alcohol, tobacco, overwork, or tension, and he was able to survive, even thrive, in the rigors of war. Battle fatigue incapacitated or killed many flag and general officers during the war, but Spruance was always fresh,

alert, and well-rested.

From time to time, however, his emotions overcame his self-control. The sight of the devastated ships at Pearl Harbor, which he first saw the day after the attack, was the most severe emotional shock of his life. Very fortunately, his wife and daughter were in Honolulu, and alone with them in the privacy of his home he purged himself of his grief, his despair, and his sense of horror. Spruance forced himself to tell them his feelings, but he was so distraught he could scarcely talk. Never again did he speak of that terrible day.

Several months later he again became emotionally upset, this time over the poor performance of his cruisers in their first battle. His wife and daughter had returned to the mainland; he had no one to talk with until a young lieutenant, whom Spruance knew well, called on him late one evening, allowing Spruance to unburden his pent-up tension and disappointment.

Having someone to confide in during the first months of the war was therapeutic for Spruance. Later, he never again talked in confidence to anyone about his feelings and reactions to the war.

In that he was a sensitive man, he could not be indifferent to the thousands of deaths, both Japanese and American, for which he was responsible. Early in the war his cruiser-destroyer force discovered a lightly armed Japanese patrol craft. He ordered a destroyer to sink it. The destroyer took a very long time to deliberately aim its guns, and the scene was not unlike a condemned prisoner before a firing squad. Everyone, including Spruance, watched from the flagship. The tension mounted, and a staff officer murmured, "Those poor devils." Spruance suddenly turned and walked away as if he could no longer bear to watch. "Yes," he said, "I feel very sorry for those poor men." Then he paused and exclaimed, "But after all, we didn't start this war." Then

he rushed back to the bridge wing to calmly watch the destroyer blast apart the Japanese ship, bit by bit.

On the last day of the Battle of Midway, American planes had attacked a Japanese cruiser that became so battered it could not defend itself, yet it refused to sink. Wave after wave of American dive bombers lashed the helpless giant, and the returning pilots reported that dead bodies were strewn about the ship and in the water. That evening, the battle over, Spruance and his staff relaxed in the Flag Mess. The radio news contained a story about a grisly murder in the United States, prompting two officers into a philosophical discussion about a murderer's mind. One officer remarked that murder was such an unnatural act that a man would have to have a deranged mind to do such a thing. With that, Spruance lowered his paper and said dryly, "What do you think I have been doing all afternoon?"

Yet he pragmatically accepted that war meant killing and that many people would have to die. He did everything in his power to reduce American casualties, primarily through meticulous planning and by using violent, overwhelming force, swiftly applied. Spruance tried to avoid civilian casualties and would have much preferred that Air Force B-29 bombers destroy Japanese defense industries, such as those producing kamikazes, rather than rain fire-bombs on Japanese civilians and cities. He could accept military men killing each other as they did in the Gilberts and Marshalls, but he deplored the killing of innocent civilians in the Marianas and on Okinawa. He was repelled by the bloodshed on Okinawa, which to him was a hellish prelude to the invasion of Japan. Spruance knew that millions of Japanese and Americans would have to die in an invasion of the home islands before Japan would surrender. Rather he preferred to blockade Japan to force her submission and save lives. But loyal

warrior that he was, he was planning that invasion when the atomic bombs ended the war. When Spruance was told that the war was over, he was walking with his son Edward on Guam. After receiving the news he said nothing, and the two men continued their walk.

One of the few emotions that his staff ever saw were occasional flashes of anger, mostly outbursts of righteous indignation. Shortly after the Battle of Midway, Spruance was pacing the *Enterprise* flight deck with some naval aviators who had sunk the Japanese carriers and who had been lucky enough to have survived. Someone handed Spruance a press release originated by the Army Air Force at Honolulu. It claimed that all the Japanese carriers had been sunk by B-17 bombers and asked where the Navy's carriers had been all the while.

Spruance's belief that war correspondents and Army bombers were next to useless began that day.

As the war progressed, he clashed with several senior officers from time to time and had a low opinion of the performance of several others. Yet Spruance never publicly criticized any person or any service as long as he lived in order to avoid controversy, and he was usually magnanimous in his praise of others. When he had been a midshipman, the infamous Sampson-Schley controversy had blighted the reputation of the naval service. He wanted no repeats, so whatever the provocations, he would not be party to a controversy.

Another emotion that sometimes surfaced was his sense of humor. Spruance was a master at subtle teasing, and his dry wit was sometimes sharp enough to cause his victim a twinge of pain. Many a fellow officer was led unsuspectingly into a clever trap and did not realize he was caught until he saw Spruance's dancing steel-grey eyes. Spruance rarely smiled. Rather his eyes smiled and always betrayed him when he was laughing inside.

His suppression of his emotions finally hastened his death. Spruance was in failing health when his son Edward was killed in a tragic automobile accident in 1969. His personal grief and anguish at having lost his only son whom he deeply loved was a shock from which he never recovered. He refused to talk about the accident and died 6 months later.

The third characteristic that made Spruance a great naval officer was his moral and physical courage.

His moral courage was manifested by his incorruptible integrity. He spoke the truth and did what was morally right regardless of the possible consequences to his own career.

At the height of the war, when there was great hostility towards Japanese-American citizens, Spruance gave a talk in California in which he publicly criticized their unjustified imprisonment in concentration camps. After the war he held his one and only press conference. He argued against the punitive confiscation of Japanese territory and recommended a drastic reduction in the size of the postwar American Navy because there were no more enemy naval powers in the near future. He was severely reprimanded by his superiors in Washington and vigorously applauded by perceptive Americans.

It was not surprising that knowledgeable Americans universally approved his appointment as Ambassador to the Philippines because of his distinguished reputation for honesty and wisdom, rare qualities that were much needed in the U.S. Government. The Philippines were embroiled in bloody political turmoil and threatened with Communist insurrection. His superb performance as Ambassador justified the faith in him first by President Truman and Secretary Acheson and later by President Eisenhower and Secretary Dulles.

Spruance's physical courage was unbelievable. Throughout the war his flagship was often attacked, yet he seemed

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oblivious to personal danger. He would gaze serenely at bombers diving upon him from above and was indifferent to projectiles from shore batteries bracketing his ship.

His flagship was always in the thick of action, whether during close-in shore fire bombardment or while accompanying Mitscher's carriers on raids on Japanese bases. Two successive flagships were hit by kamikazes at Okinawa. On U.S.S. *New Mexico* frantic staff officers, fearing the worst, searched for Spruance. They found him calmly manning a fire hose, concerned only whether any codebooks had been found in the crashed kamikaze.

There is no record of Spruance ever explaining his behavior in battle. A commander traditionally has been expected to set an example of bravery under fire, and Spruance had disciplined himself after years of sea duty to remain calm in periods of danger and great stress. Bombs and bullets headed his way were simply a magnification of the hazards he had overcome before the war. He never flinched, never ducked, never faltered.

Yet his worried subordinates argued that, whatever the benefits provided by his example of personal courage, they were not worth the risk of losing him. They argued he owed it to the Navy to stay alive. Spruance ignored their pleas.

Perhaps Spruance had little faith in the scanty protection of the thin-skinned flag bridges against armor-piercing bombs and projectiles and felt it would be useless to seek protection. Better to fatalistically stay in the open. John Paul Jones and Admiral Lord Nelson were always exposed in battle; Spruance had plenty of precedent. A naval commander simply did not go into battle hiding from personal danger.

Transcending his other virtues, however, was his most important military virtue of all: his fighting spirit. That fighting spirit included his eagerness and desire to come to grips with the enemy, to press on with vigor and determination against all obstacles, and to keep fighting until the battle was won.

Raymond Spruance was a fascinating and complex man. Although he was an enigma to everyone, we must try to understand him and learn from him, because he was a master at the art of naval warfare and later was a skillful diplomat and statesman. He dedicated his life to serving his country and his President with wisdom, self-discipline, courage, and fighting spirit. He sought not personal glory but rather the satisfaction of having served faithfully and well.

He envied no man, regarded no one as rival, won the respect of all with whom he came in contact, and went ahead in his quiet way, winning victories for his country.

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### BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



Comdr. Thomas B. Buell, U.S. Navy, is a 1958 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy and graduated from the Naval Postgraduate School in 1964 with the degree of bachelor of science in electrical engineering.

He has served four operational tours in destroyers, most recently as Executive Officer, U.S.S. *John King* (DDG 3). Commander Buell is a 1971 graduate of the College of Naval Command and Staff. He is now assigned to the Naval War College to participate in the Professional Development Program and is conducting independent study and research in 20th-century naval warfare.

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